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SIS



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LACKGROUND

USDA Rule Mandates Safe Handling Statements for Raw Meat and Poultry Products

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is the public health Agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) responsible for ensuring that meat and poultry products are safe, wholesome, and accurately labeled. As part of a comprehensive effort to protect consumers from foodborne illness, as of May 27, 1994, USDA is requiring safe handling instructions on packages of all raw or partially cooked ground meat and poultry products. All other not-ready-to-eat meat and poultry products, such as chicken thighs and steaks, must carry the label by July 6, 1994. Mandatory safe handling instructions on raw meat and poultry products can be an important educational tool. The instructions provide food handlers with critical food safety information when it is most needed—at the point of purchase and during preparation.

The Regulation

The regulation covers all raw or partially cooked meat and poultry products (fresh and frozen) packaged and labeled in federally and state inspected plants or in retail stores and sold to consumers and institutions. The requirements also apply to imported meat and poultry products. However, products that will be further processed in a plant under inspection are exempt from the requirements because they will not reach consumers or food service operations.

The regulation prescribes the exact language and symbols to be used for the safe handling instructions. (See illustration.) The same safe handling instructions are used for all meat and/or poultry products that are not-ready-to-eat whether they are for household or institutional kitchens or produced in federal and state plants or in retail stores. Products that do not include the instructions on their labels will be considered misbranded and subject to enforcement action.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
NATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE

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CATALOGING PREP.

Safe Handling Instructions

This product was prepared from inspected and passed meat and/or poultry. Some food products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. For your protection, follow these safe handling instructions.



Keep refrigerated or frozen.
Thaw in refrigerator or microwave.



Keep raw meat and poultry separate from other foods.
Wash working surfaces (including cutting boards),
utensils, and hands after touching raw meat or poultry.



Cook thoroughly.



Keep hot foods hot. Refrigerate leftovers
immediately or discard.

Why Follow Safe Handling Instructions?

As the label illustration explains, some food products, including meat and poultry, may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. To prevent bacterial growth and to reduce the risk of foodborne illness, consumers must follow safe food handling practices from the time perishable products are purchased until they have been cooked and stored. The label uses symbols to draw consumers' attention to these practices. The label also shows and tells how to safely store and thaw meat and poultry, how to prevent the spread of bacteria, the importance of cooking thoroughly and how to store leftovers.

Storing and Thawing

Safe storing and thawing of meat and poultry can prevent food poisoning. Storing these perishable foods at safe refrigerator temperatures of 40 degrees F. and below slows bacterial growth. Freezer temperatures of 0 degrees F. stop nearly all bacterial growth.

Thawing meat and poultry in the refrigerator or microwave helps control bacterial growth. Never thaw perishable products on the countertop. Food defrosts from the outside inward. If meat or poultry is left to thaw on a counter at room temperature, bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels on the product's surface before the inside completely thaws.

Thawing in the microwave is another safe option, but foods must be cooked immediately after defrosting.

Keep Bacteria From Spreading

Keep everything clean by washing with hot, soapy water. Because raw meat and poultry may carry bacteria, it is important to clean surfaces, including your hands, after contact with these raw products. This prevents the spread of bacteria from raw meat and poultry to cooked foods.

Cook Thoroughly

Thorough cooking is the best protection against foodborne illness. Meat and poultry should be cooked to proper temperatures to ensure bacteria are destroyed. The chart below lists recommended safe cooking temperatures for various meat and poultry products prepared at home.

COOKING TEMPERATURES	
Product	Fahrenheit
Fresh Beef, Veal, Lamb	
Ground products like hamburger (Prepared as patties, meat loaf, meatballs, etc.)	160
Roasts, steaks and chops	
Medium Rare	145
Medium	160
Well done	170
Fresh Pork	
All cuts including ground product	
Medium	160
Well done	170
Poultry	
Ground Chicken, Turkey	165
Whole Chicken, Turkey	
Medium, unstuffed	170
Well done	180
Whole Bird with stuffing (Stuffing must reach 165°)	180
Poultry breasts, roasts	170
Thighs, Wings	Cook until juices run clear
Ham	
Fresh (raw)	160
Fully cooked, to reheat	140

Store Leftovers Promptly

Bacteria and other pathogens are always ready to endanger food. To keep bacteria from multiplying in cooked food, don't let it sit out at room temperature for more than two hours. Leftovers should be stored in the refrigerator or freezer promptly. Divide large quantities and place into small, shallow containers. This also applies to large pieces of meat and poultry, which should be deboned and divided into smaller serving sizes for safe storage. In addition, remove stuffing from poultry or other stuffed meats and refrigerate in separate containers. Discard any food that was left out too long.

Background

In 1972, the American Public Health Association (APHA), individual consumers and six other public health and consumer interest groups brought a suit against USDA alleging that meat and poultry labels were false and misleading because they failed to warn consumers against the dangers of foodborne illness caused by bacteria. The courts ruled in favor of USDA. The Secretary of Agriculture chose to undertake a consumer education program instead of requiring labeling instructions for meat and poultry.

On August 16, 1993, in response to the January outbreak of foodborne illness caused by *E. coli* 0157:H7 in the western United States and continued food poisoning outbreaks, some accompanied by deaths, USDA officials issued an emergency or interim final rule to require safe handling instructions on packages of raw and not-ready-to-eat meat and poultry products. The interim final rule, which requested comments for 30 days, would have become effective 60 days after publication in the Federal Register.

On October 12, 1993, USDA issued a final rule with some modifications, based on comments to the interim final rule. The final rule was to become effective October 15, but the court barred implementation of the rule. On October 18, USDA filed a motion to remove the injunction in an Austin, Texas, U.S. district court. However, the Court upheld the injunction on the basis that "there was no cause for an expedited rulemaking process since *E. coli* outbreaks are isolated and separate."

Rather than continuing to challenge the Court, on procedural grounds, the Department issued a new proposed rule on November 4, 1993, which called for a 45-day comment period and implementation 30 days after publication of the final rule. Following review and analysis of comments to the proposal, FSIS issued a new final regulation on March 28, 1994, with a May 27 effective date for raw and partially cooked ground meat and poultry products and a July 6 effective date for all other not-ready-to-eat meat and poultry products.

Pathogen Reduction

USDA estimates that foodborne illnesses caused by bacteria on mishandled or undercooked meat and poultry products cost the nation approximately \$3.9 to \$4.3 billion each year.

Requiring mandatory safe handling labeling for raw meat and poultry products is one of a number of steps that Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy has directed under the Pathogen Reduction Program, a comprehensive initiative to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. The program was initiated as a result of a tragic outbreak of foodborne illness in January 1993 in several western states caused by infections from the pathogenic or harmful bacterial strain *E. coli* 0157:H7. Undercooked hamburgers served in several restaurants of a fast food chain were identified as the primary source of the pathogenic bacteria.

The Pathogen Reduction Program focuses on reducing pathogens throughout the food production chain—on the farm, in slaughter and processing plants, during transportation and distribution, and in the kitchen. USDA has established a

Pathogen Reduction Task Force with oversight for the more than 70 pathogen reduction activities underway. The Department anticipates adding more initiatives as new technology becomes available to integrate into the inspection program.

Along with these efforts, FSIS is assuming a more aggressive role in the area of public health. The Agency has placed an FSIS veterinary epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta to track and investigate foodborne illness outbreaks. The Agency has created a Public Health Division to be headed by a medical professional to advise the department on public health issues. FSIS is also encouraging states to mandate the reporting of foodborne disease outbreaks and is working with the medical community to ensure physicians and other health professionals are better informed about foodborne illness and disease.

Consumer Education

Consumer education is a key component of USDA's pathogen reduction strategy because studies indicate a significant number of foodborne illness outbreaks are caused in part by simple food handling mistakes, and some food preparers lack basic food safety information and skills. Since the 1970's, FSIS has conducted a comprehensive food safety program to educate consumers about safe handling, preparation, and storage of meat and poultry products. The Agency distributes nearly a half million publications and brochures on safe food handling each year, and operates a toll-free, nationwide hotline staffed by food safety specialists who provide consumers food safety information one-on-one. FSIS also targets specialized audiences—persons most susceptible to foodborne illness and cooks in restaurants, hospitals and other institutions.

Since January 1993, FSIS has established extensive education campaigns to prepare and educate consumers to use the new safe handling instructions.

FSIS has worked with such organizations as the Food Marketing Institute as well as supermarkets and other stores to provide information at the point of purchase to help consumers and food service employees understand the safe handling instructions. FSIS has also developed "A Quick Consumer Guide to Safe Food Handling Labels" to explain why the safe handling instructions are important.

FSIS launched an ongoing food safety campaign in May 1994 in three major cities—Atlanta, New York and Seattle—to tell parents and students the importance of cooking hamburgers all the way through. The Agency will continue to work with the national School Nurses Association to distribute more than two million post cards and other materials, including a flyer, "Protecting Your Children—What You Should Know about *E. coli* 0157:H7."

FSIS is setting up the USDA/FDA Foodborne Illness Education Center to provide an exchange of information on ongoing food safety education projects to food safety educators and trainers in the public and private sector.



Other Available Food Safety Materials:

- A Quick Consumer Guide to Safe Food Handling Labels.
- A Consumer Guide to Safe Handling and Preparation of Ground Meat and Ground Poultry.
- FSIS Backgrounder: *Escherichia Coli* Update: *E. coli* 0157:H7.
- FSIS Facts: Bacteria that Cause Foodborne Illness.
- Preventing Foodborne Illness—a Guide to Safe Food Handling.

For publications, information on food safety projects or food handling advice, consumers can call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time or listen to pre-recorded messages by calling 1-800-535-4555 or (202) 720-3333 in the Washington, DC, area.

For additional information on mandatory safe handling instructions and other FSIS issues, please phone:

**FSIS Food Labeling Division (202) 254-2599
FSIS News Office at (202) 720-9113**

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